



ORAL HISTORY AS A PATH TO PRESERVE THE MAGICAL HERITAGE OF MAYANG

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ABSTRACT

Oral history is one of the new emerging trends in historical research. Oral history is important in recording and exploring the previously untouched areas of historical research. The region of Mayang is located in the state of Assam in India. The region has a very rich magical culture, whose tales have filled the legends and folk tales of the region. This culture is the cultural identity of the region. In recent years, due to environmental degradation and the unwillingness of the young generation to take up this profession, the magical culture of Mayang is in a state of decline. This culture forms the bedrock of the history of the region, and hence it is the need of the hour to preserve this rich tradition. This paper tries to analyse how oral history can play a very vital role in preserving this culture and carry its significance for the future generations.

KEYWORDS: Oral History, Magical Traditions, Culture, Mayang

INTRODUCTION

Oral history is a relatively new field of study in the field of historical studies. However, the use of oral sources is not new in reconstructing the image of the past. The early historians, like Herodotus, Thucydides, Cato, and others often depended on oral testimonies and eyewitness reports to narrate the events of a particular historical event or period. It was only with the rise in the use of archival sources and facts, and the need to create a "scientific history" that the use of oral sources fell out of use. It was only after the development of proper equipment like voice and audio recorders, particularly after the end of World War II that oral history came into use as a source of historical research. (Thomson, 2010) Oral history came to be used particularly for recording the history of the subaltern, the class of "marginalised" people, like the workers, labourers, and others. The study of "history from below" got a significant impetus from the development of oral history, as the interests of these classes were seldom represented in the archives and other conventional historical sources. Moreover, they gave the historians a chance to understand the perspective of these people, from their own voices. The rise of oral history in the 1940s coincided with some of the most brutal and horrifying incidents that marred the history of the world. Oral testimonies played a very key role in giving a voice to the many political prisoners of Nazi Germany, the lives they led in the concentration camps. Similarly in India, the brutality and horrors of the violence of the Partition that severed the country into two, was recorded in the oral testimonies given by the various victims of the violence. With the development of post-colonial studies and the decline of colonialism across the world, oral records and testimonies gained a new paradigm. Now historians could understand the history of the various ethnic communities of the different continents. These communities often do not have a written script, but they have a very rich and varied cultural knowledge. The understanding of the colonial rule, and its impact on the

local people, has to be understood from the perspective of these communities, and this is what formed the base of oral history. Oral historians recorded the folk tales, ballads, legends of these communities, based on which a new understanding was formed about the diverse communities of the African continent.

North-East India also provides a similar backdrop to historians. The various ethnic communities of the region have a very diverse and rich tradition and culture. Most of these traditions are carried forward orally from one generation to another. These oral traditions, contain the key to the proper understanding of these different communities. They also are the identity markers of these communities, and thus the preservation of these traditions and culture is necessary.

Mayang is located in the Morigaon district of Assam. The region has a very rich heritage. Since times immemorial, the region of Mayang is associated with magic and mysticism. The region has a very deep-rooted link with the prevailing *Tantric* rituals of the ancient period. This made the region a key site for the practice of *Tantrism* and its allied rituals. The origins of the magicians of Mayang, called *bez*, is rooted in these tantric rituals. The legends of the *bez*s of Mayang are quite widespread and popular across the state. Even now, people from different walks of life and different regions, including from other countries, travel to Mayang to consult these magicians. The powers of the magicians of Mayang range from the supernatural, like teleportation, flying, turning people into animals, illusionary magic, to the very mundane, like cures from various ailments, basic protection rituals etc. This art and practice of magic is an identity of the region of Mayang. The magicians use various local produce, like animal products, herbs and other similar items for their rituals. They also have different spells for performing the different forms of magic. This rich tradition of the region is passed orally from person to person, and only

the true practitioners know the art of performing the various magical feats. As the younger generation is unwilling to carry forward this tradition, the number of practitioners is declining. Thus, this paper will try to analyse the role oral history can play in preserving the rich magical history of the region of Mayang.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Both primary and secondary sources were consulted for the purpose of the study. Field studies and oral interviews were conducted with the local people, *bez*s and the officials of the Mayang Village Museum and Research Centre to understand the practices associated with the magical culture of Mayang. Secondary sources were also consulted to get a better idea about the scope and use of oral history. Moreover, they were also used to get a proper understanding the research site, and the traditions and culture of the region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The region of Mayang is steeped in rich history and heritage. The region is known since ancient times as a site of practicing *Tantrism* and *Shaktism*. There are numerous *Shakti* shrines spread across the region. The region of Mayang is virtually landlocked and is surrounded by hills. These hills gave the magical practitioners of the region a place of relative isolation to conduct various rituals and practice meditation. This is corroborated by the presence of numerous rock cut caves in the hills, where the early practitioners conducted various rituals and hone their skills. The magical practitioners of Mayang closely guard their art and knowledge. The knowledge of magic and its practice is passed orally from the teacher (*guru*) to his scholars. The teacher personally handpicks his students. As per the testimony of one magician, his *guru* personally came up to him and said that he had the ability of practicing magic and asked his parents for permission to train up their son for performing magic. The practice of magical rituals is an integral part of the society of Mayang, and there are no social constraints regarding taking up this profession. The Mayang Village Museum and Research Centre has a very rich collection of *mantraputhis*. These are written on tree barks (*sanchipa*) and are not yet properly deciphered. Thus, the history and practices of these magicians of Mayang are still hidden and not properly explored. The tales of the feats of the magicians of Mayang are widespread across the state of Assam, and people travelling to the region are still often warned about the magical practices of the region. Tales like the magicians turning mango leaves into fish using illusionary magic, salt and pepper containers walking across for use by the hosts etc. fill the local legends. There is even a legend that during the Burmese invasion of Assam, the magicians created a barrier using magic to prevent the invaders from invading the region of Mayang. (Assaduzzaman, 2023)

Most of the supernatural feats of the magicians of Mayang are lost in time. Evidence regarding the performance of the same are scanty at best. However, there are certain exemptions in this regard. Like for instance, the practice of bringing a tiger under their control was practiced till the 1960s and eyewitnesses still exist who witnessed the same. Most of the present-day rituals are associated with “white magic”. The local *bez*s have a very rich knowledge about the traditional medicinal practices. They

are very adept in identifying the various medicinal herbs and natural products. They use them for curing various illnesses like back pain, snake bites, fever, jaundice etc.

The preservation of this traditional knowledge system is the need of the hour. They form a very rich storehouse of knowledge about the various natural products of the region and their various health benefits. With the rise of alternate health options, they form a very rich cultural identity of the region. Moreover, with the prevailing environmental deterioration and climate change, many of these natural produces are becoming extinct or rare. It is high time to preserve the knowledge regarding these natural resources of the region. The magical culture of Mayang forms the cultural identity of the region. However, the unwillingness of the younger generation in taking part in this field, has led to a decline of these traditions. The practice of these rituals requires much physical hardships, which many are not willing to endure. Many households who previously had magicians in their family are also scared of these rituals. The local museum, when conducting surveys, found that certain households are also unwilling to continue these practices. The magical tradition is like a devotion. The art of magic is something the magicians worship and the use of the various chants require certain rituals that have to be followed. With the rise of the modern life, people are finding less time to indulge in these rituals which have drawn away people from practicing this tradition. Hence most of the *bez*s of Mayang are of an advanced age, and they are carrying with them some very vital information about the magical culture of Mayang. This knowledge forms a key part of the cultural heritage of the region.

Oral history plays a very vital role in this regard. As most of the magical heritage is passed orally from one practitioner to the other, it is ideal to record the oral testimonies of these practitioners to preserve it for posterity. These oral traditions form the bedrock of the history of Mayang. The legends and folk traditions of the region depict the rich history of the region and its interaction with the outside world. Thus, it is the need of the hour to preserve these traditions. Most of the *mantraputhis* are still in the households of the region, and not properly preserved. These families are also unwilling to part with these written works, as they feel it will bring ill omen on the family. The *mantraputhis* preserved in the Mayang Village Museum and Research Centre is certainly preserved in a scientific manner, however very few of them can be properly deciphered. Hence, oral testimonies can form the way to preserve the rich heritage of the region.

CONCLUSION

Mayang is a historically saturated region which has a very rich magical culture and tradition. This culture is on a decline, mostly because of environmental concerns and the unwillingness of the new generation to take up the profession. Thus, it is the need of the time to preserve this rich cultural storehouse. The magicians of Mayang have a lot of knowledge about the local ecology and environment. They have a very intrinsic knowledge about the local flora and fauna, and the various health benefits they possess. The feats of the magicians of Mayang are spread far and wide, and believers in their practice are spread across

the country and even in other countries. The magical culture of Mayang is the cultural identity of the region. Most of this magical knowledge is passed orally from one practitioner to the other, across generations. Hence, in this regard, oral history plays a very vital role in preserving the rich history of the region. Oral testimonies of the magicians can be recorded and can be preserved for posterity. These oral testimonies will form a rich source of knowledge for future researchers to get a proper understanding of the rich heritage of the region and also ensure that the magical practices and culture of Mayang does not become a lost form of art.

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